DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 033 CS 210 131

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TITLE Babbitt's Brothers & Sisters: Raising Ethical Issues in Business Literature.
PUB DATE 14 Mar 86
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (37th, New Orleans, LA, March 13-15, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business English; Career Education; *Ethical Instruction; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; Moral Values; Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Reading Writing Relationship; *Technical Writing
IDENTIFIERS Business Ethics; *Business Literature

ABSTRACT

A college-level course in business literature is an ideal place to raise and discuss ethical issues. To be successful, a teacher of this course must engage student interest, help the students articulate and understand their own ethical attitudes, clarify the stance and artistry of the author, and refine student responses to ethical questions. When dealing with books such as "Iacocca: An Autobiography," Benjamin Franklin's "Autobiography," "The Rise of Silas Lapham," "A Cool Million," "Death of a Salesman," "The Pit," "Babbitt," "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," and "The Soul of a New Machine," the questions that consistently engaged student interest were: (1) "How will I balance my dedication to building a career with my respoinsiblity to a family?" (2) "What should I do when my personal values conflict with the accepted practices of business or industry?" and (3) "What happens when the traditional American image of success does not work for me and others like me?" Ideas for teaching about ethics in business literature can be applied to other courses such as technical or business writing classes, or other literature courses, especially classes with a diverse, career-oriented clientele. (SRT)

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CCCC
March 14, 1986
New Orleans

BABBITT'S BROTHERS & SISTERS: RAISING ETHICAL ISSUES IN BUSINESS LITERATURE

When I told one of my colleagues that I was developing a course about business literature, his first response was, "Why on earth would you want to spend a whole semester on THAT?" And when I said that I'd been reading books like "that" all year and thought my students would enjoy them, he said, "Well, they probably enjoy Dallas on Friday nights, too, but that doesn't mean we should teach it in the English department!"

Such was the inauspicious beginning of "In Corporate America: Books about Business," which I'm going to tell you about today. My colleague's reaction, though it did not deter me, did make me consider WHY I was introducing this new course. To be honest, my original reasons were not entirely disinterested. I had noticed in my business writing classes that very few students had much experience reading good writing. Most references to fiction, drama or (heaven forbid) poetry drifted past them virtually unobserved, and their writing showed few signs that they were experienced or careful readers. I thought that if career-oriented students could be enticed into a course that promised them insignt into the business world, they might learn to enjoy reading--and perhaps even improve their writing.

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As I began to plan the course, I realized that my overriding goal was not only to help students improve their reading and writing but to help them consider critical issues they would face in their business or professional lives, issues which would certainly comprise a substantial part of their larger lives as individuals, family members, and citizens. Among these concerns, none seems to me more critical than ethical choice.

In this talk, I will suggest how students learn to make ethical choices. I will then show how a course in business literature can raise important ethical questions and how teachers can apply ideas from a course like this to their other classes.

HOW STUDENTS LEARN TO MAKE ETHICAL CHOICES

How do students learn to make ethical choices? Certainly, a vast literature from psychology, sociology, and anthropology suggests that ethical standards are developed by family, friends, and church, often early in life. But back home in Indiana, we have a good many church-sponsored radio programs that consistently lament the shoddy ethics foisted upon youth by TV and movies. And since the beginning of private and public education in America, schools at all levels have assumed some responsibility for teaching ethical behavior. Indeed, a big issue these days, even in graduate schools of business administration, is whether ethics should be taught as a specific course or as a component of many courses—ranging from computer systems to organizational communication to finance (Dividend, July 1985). And finally, there is strong evidence that learning to make sound ethical choices is a life-long activity. In an excellent article in the Harvard Business Review entitled "How Ethical Are Businessmen?" Raymond C. Baumhart shows that executives of all ages (34 to over 65)

"show a strong desire to improve business behavior" (p. 6) because "sound ethics is good business in the long run" (p. 10). Clearly, a strong sense of ethics depends on life-long learning, evaluation, and adjustment.

I contend that an ideal place to raise and discuss ethical questions is in college literature classes. And I claim, further, that courses specifically attuned to the career interests of non-English majors--even non-humanities majors--offer wonderful opportunities for us not only to raise questions of ethics but also to show students that reading and writing can help them explore and clarify their ethical values. I would now like to suggest how a course in business literature can raise important ethical questions.

HOW A COURSE IN BUSINESS LITERATURE CAN RAISE IMPORTANT ETHICAL QUESTIONS

Ethical issues are always implicit in American literature. Books often include questions about the choices characters make: which commitments a character chooses to put first, how actions reflect values, where these values originate, and whether they should be followed or abandoned. Although such questions are embedded in a specific situation, plot, and time frame, they can have broader relevance to our students when they are made the focus of discussion and personal consideration. While such a focus does not imply that teachers neglect framing the literature they teach with important biographical, historical or critical background, emphasizing ethics does require that ethical questions get top billing. Further, focusing on ethics requires that students do most of the talking. They must be thoroughly involved in each book, testing their own ethical ideas against those of other students within the context of

the author's imaginative creation. As Louise Rosenblatt has shown in her classic Literature as Exploration (3rd ed., 1976), orchestrating a literature class in this way presents at least four challenges to teachers:

- engaging student interest
- helping students articulate and understand their own ethical attitudes
- clarifying the stance and artistry of the author and
- refining student responses to ethical questions.

Engaging student interest

The first challenge for any teacher is engagement. Often students--especially those from diverse backgrounds--will be taking English for a wide range of reasons. In my business literature class, for instance, the 21 students gave 13 different reasons for electing the course. None, however, mentioned a connection between ethics and business--even though the course announcement clearly stated that this course would "raise important questions about business activity--ethical, social, and personal questions." I had, therefore, to engage my students' interest--not only in the novels, plays, poems, and non-fiction we would read but also in the notion that the core of the course would be ethics, a subject that would be important throughout their lives.

Since engagement was my first challenge, it became necessary to organize the readings not in a typical historical sequence--say from Benjamin Franklin to Sinclair Lewis to Arthur Miller-- but rather in an inviting order. For me, the best bait was Lee Iacocca. As the first day assignment, we read the version of Iacocca: An Autobiography excerpted in Newsweek. And naturally, the students were hooked. Here was a definition of business success that they

could all agree was as American as--well--as American as a movie actor becoming president!

Moving backward to an earlier though no less hackneyed version of the image, we read two books by Horatio Alger, books that underscored the moral and ethical elements of the myth that my students (and Iacocca and I) had grown up with. And finally we pushed backward in time to the grandaddy of us all, Benjamin Franklin, reading both the Autobiography and "The Way to Wealth" from Poor Richard's Almanac (1857). Only then, with a corpus of ethical issues we could all agree were typically associated with business in America, were we prepared to consider the notion that ethical choices might be more complex than the books we had read so far would imply. As this transparency shows, I began in the historical present to engage student interest and establish the grounding for the course, then moved through a century of readings that added complexity to the standard image with books ranging from Howell's 1885 Rise of Silas Lapham all the way to Kidder's 1982 The Soul of a New Machine.

Helping students articulate the ethical values

The second challenge for teachers is to help students articulate their own attitudes toward business, identify the sources of these attitudes, and understand the effects such attitudes can have on reading. Among the methods I chose to help the students explore their attitudes were consistent class discussions, journals writing, and small-group presentations on each book. They wrote for every class, with assignments ranging from personal or imaginative writing to formal essay exams.

The first strong conflicts occurred when we read D. H. Lawrence's diatribe against our national hero, whom Lawrence called "snuff-colored little Benjamin." When Lawrence complained that Franklin allowed no room in his tidy

cosmology for passion or sensuality or irrational choice, students who had not previously considered this problem usually defended Franklin. And others jumped into the fray on Lawrence's side. Similar conflicts arose when we talked about characters like Bromfield Corey, the wealthy, dilettante Boston Brahmin in The Rise of Silas Lapham. Because Corey had not risen from rags to riches--had never, in fact, worked at all--he was totally unacceptable to several students sold on the image of the self-made man. Others defended him as a good representative of those whose fathers had accumulated wealth for their offspring to enjoy. As we dug into why the attitudes surfacing in this class were so contrastive and how such attitudes might influence reading, we developed a more kaleidoscopic view of the issues raised in each book. And we began to consider with more complexity several ethical questions associated with our peculiarly American image of success.

Clarifying the stance and artistry of the author

The third challenge for teachers is to clarify the view or stance of the author within his or her time frame and to help students see exactly what the author wrote. Sold as many of my students originally were on Horatio Alger's novels as useful guides for youth, they were also eventually able to understand why in the 30's Nathaneal West turned the Alger stories inside out in A Cool Million and why in the 40's Miller's Death of a Salesman depicted a world so different from Alger's yet so ripe for Iacocca. Not only did ethical questions about conflicts in responsibility emerge as the semester went on, but students came to understand the difficulty of resolving certain ethical issues by examining them within a historical perspective.

Students also learned to understand how writers create the worlds we enter through reading. Though it may not, at first glance, seem that literary or artistic questions will enhance ethical understanding, such questions do enable students to see more accurately what is actually on the page. To ask students why a book begins as it does or what the author has actually shown about a character or what the most important symbols are provides insight into an author's meaning. For instance, students see that houses, clothes, watches, cars, books, paintings, or gadgets of all kinds--these consistent symbols of wealth and respectability--carry meanings peculiar to the literature of business. While such symbols may have no special significance in Huckleberry Finn, Moby-Dick, For Whom the Bell Tolls, or The Natural, they always represent levels of social or monetary status in books about business. How these symbols are used artistically offers insight into the value system operating in a specific book. Students who learn to attend to literary devices like symbols can separate what the author means from what they as readers may impose on that meaning. By becoming better readers, they gain insight into the ethical issues raised in the books they read.

Refining students' responses to ethical questions

The final challenge to teachers, then, is to refine students' responses to the ethical questions raised in class. Such questions emerge from the students' personal concerns, from the readings in the course, and from the discussions students have about these readings. During the two years I have taught "In Corporate America: Books about Business," I have seen students toss ideas back and forth, listening to and learning from each other, broadening their occasionally narrow views through inquiry and discussion.

Some of my most stalwart champions of organized religion were amazed to hear one student explain Ben Franklin's notion of morality not in terms of any organized religion but in terms of doing good for others through public service. When, later in the semester, we returned to the question of religion in Babbitt, the students with rather narrow views about connections between church-going and being a good businessman were more inclined to recognize a possible split between the two.

As the students refined their views about the ethical choices they would confront in their lives, the questions that most consistently engaged their interest were three: How will I balance my dedication to building a career with my responsibility to a family? What should I do when my personal values conflict with the accepted practices of business and industry? What happens when the traditional American image of success does not work for me and others like me?

Question 1: How will I balance my dedication to building a career with my responsibility to a family? This question emerged first in Franklin's Autobiography, where any explicit reference to his wife ended on page 85 of our 218-page edition, and where mention of his children did not fare much better. Clearly, this public man was most interested in presenting to posterity only the public aspect of his life--not an atypical attitude in the 18th century, surely, but one hardly representative of my students' attitudes.

Consistently, these students--many whom were in or approaching their last year of college--wondered how the career (or graduate school) choice they were about to make would influence their hopes of building a solid family life. Men and women alike saw a satisfying career and a solid family as essential to their future happiness. In fact, one student began the essay for his application to a graduate school of business administration by writing: "My goal in

life is very clear: happiness through a close-knit family and a rewarding career." Perhaps because so many students nowadays come from families where divorce has been caused by what seems to them a lack of commitment to family integrity, my students were very sensitive to doing right by their families. They wondered what price their families might have to pay for their business or professional success.

This question was discussed within the context of such books as The Pit, Babbitt, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, and even The Soul of a New Machine. Gradually, students came to realize that there was no easy answer, that they would have to make choices at various points in their lives. They also realized that their most important challenge would be to define what their personal priorities were rather than accepting an extrinsically imposed image of success, an image that might confuse symbols like houses or clothes or cars with happiness.

Question 2: What should I do when my personal values conflict with the accepted practices of business or industry? Many of the characters we read about--and some we only discussed in passing--made ethical choices based on their personal value systems, choices that sometimes led to the loss of money or, even worse, to personal grief. In All My Sons, which we added as an optional reading because of its relevance to the 1986 Challenger disaster, Joe Keller suffered immeasurable grief because of his profit-motivated decision to sell imperfect airplanes to the Army during World War II. By contrast, Tom Rath in The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit chose not to accept a high-paying job that would keep him from fully enjoying the pleasures of family and community life. In both instances, characters made ethical choices--whether bad or good--based on their personal values.

Discussing such choices, students come to understand how important it is to know what matters to them and how what they do will affect others. Though a literature course may not directly influence business behavior, it can prepare students to address the kinds of questions they are likely to have to answer in their careers.

Question 3: What happens when the traditional American image of success does not work for me and others like me? That Iacocca: An Autobiography is the best-selling book in American publishing history after the Bible proves the vitality of the success image inspired by Franklin and promoted by Alger. However, the novels in this course suggest to students that the Iacocca image of success--the very image students have internalized so completely--may not be exactly the one they would choose for themselves. Books like The Great Gatsby, plays like Death of a Salesman, and poems like Marge Piercy's "To Be of Use" raise questions about the price paid for holding too fast to the prevailing view of success. A course about business literature raises issues that make students consider what is important to them and what kinds of choices they may want to or have to make in their working lives.

In a recent article in Fortune magazine, Jack Cashill claims that American business fiction is stacked against the businessman, and that even when it is not, college English professors teach it as though it were. Certainly books like Frank Norris' The Octopus or Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (or almost any book about bankers) offers some justification for this view. But more often, books about business present a complex view of the consequences of the drive for money or power. It is the teacher's responsibility to present the issues raised by business literature in all their complexity. And it is the student's responsibility to winnow from what they read and store for future use alternatives to the traditional American image of success.

The ethical issues raised in business literature and discussed in class are often similar to issues addressed in how-to books on office politics or getting ahead or one-upping the boss. Surely students need to consider such issues seriously and give some thought to their own values before they become enmeshed in the minute-by-minute pressures of business life, pressures which may prompt them to accept the slippery ethics presented in popular books on success. Learning to make sound ethical choices is a life-long activity and one that deserves serious cultivation in literature and writing classes.

HOW TEACHERS CAN APPLY IDEAS FROM A COURSE LIKE THIS TO OTHER CLASSES

And this brings me to my final point: that teachers in other literature classes and also in writing classes can adapt some of the ideas I have suggested here to their general teaching. While you may not want to or be free to develop a course on the literature of business, you may feel some responsibility to raise ethical issues in your other literature classes--especially classes with a diverse, career-oriented clientele. If you are inclined in this direction, I strongly recommend Rosenblatt's Literature as Exploration, a book that will help you cultivate connections between the literature your students read and the lives they live.

In writing classes, you will find it relatively easy to raise ethical questions in freshman or advanced composition, especially in courses which involve some reading--from student papers, readers or both. Simply choosing examples that encourage the discussion of questions like those I listed earlier will provide a forum for students to test their values.

But I think an ideal setting for confronting ethical issues is in courses devoted to on-the-job writing, courses in business, technical, or professional

writing. When students are actually writing resumés, letters, and reports, they are always making ethical choices. How can I present myself honestly in this resumé and still get an interview? How can I write a letter that will sell this product without overstating what it can do? Should this report say what I found or what the boss wants to hear? The best way to help students address such questions is to create an atmosphere where they feel free to raise and discuss their concerns.

Since ethical questions rarely have ready answers, the best we can do in our literature or writing courses is to engage our students' interest in the frequently neglected subject of ethics. We can encourage them to explore their views, test them against the views of others, and anticipate problems that may arise later in their lives. And we may, into the bargain, convince our students how important reading and writing really are.